

## EAST SHEFFORD CHURCH, BERKSHIRE

*by Eve Baker*

---

**E**AST SHEFFORD is situated on the west bank of the River Lambourn, which flows to Newbury in the south-east and thence, joining the Kennet, into the Thames at Reading. About a mile to the north of East Shefford is West or Great Shefford, with a bridge carrying the road from Wantage to Hungerford. This Shefford area has a long history of human habitation. Only a few miles distant was the Roman posting station of Spinae (modern Speen, near Newbury) on the great Roman highway from London to Bath. Here the Ermine Street branched off in a north-western direction over the hill tops to Cirencester and passed within a mile of West Shefford, where an extensive Roman cemetery has been found near the site of a Roman camp.

East Shefford is now a very small village but it was evidently an important early Saxon settlement, for on the east bank of the river in 1890, when the branch railway was being cut from Newbury to Lambourn, there was uncovered an Anglo-Saxon cemetery with male and female, old and young skeletons, and high grade swords, rings, enamelled brooches and glass drinking vessels, all dating from at latest the early sixth century and now in the British Museum. Later, East Shefford became the centre of one of the hundreds into which Wessex was divided by the end of Alfred's reign, for here until a century ago was the meeting place of that hundred. East Shefford was very near the road from Wantage (Alfred's birthplace) to Hungerford and was most probably, like the latter, a royal manor. Its position and standing would in any case lead one to expect that it had a Saxon church, and one of some significance.

After the Norman Conquest East Shefford was granted to, and became the home of, the Fettiplaces, a rich and powerful Norman family said to have owned land in fifteen counties. Adam Fettiplace became Mayor of Oxford in 1250. His fifteenth-century descendant, Sir Thomas Fettiplace, Sheriff of Berkshire and Oxfordshire, married Beatrix, reputed to have been one of the King of Portugal's daughters, and their alabaster tomb with recumbent effigies, c.1450, is in the chancel (Plate 1). Later, Sir John Fettiplace (died 1524) and his



(1) East Shefford Church: Alabaster tomb of Sir Thomas Fettiplace and his wife Beatrix, c. 1450.

wife Dorothy (1559) were also buried in the chancel in a canopied Purbeck marble tomb with brasses (Plate 2). The church also contains, found in the thickness of the chancel wall, a Caen stone coffin of much earlier date than the above mentioned tombs. The coffin has engraved upon it a large cross and probably the tree of life (Plate 3). In 1503 the Fettiplaces acquired the manor of Swinbrook in neighbouring Oxfordshire and so most later members of the family were buried in the church of that manor. The family died out in 1805 and their fifteenth-century manor house near East Shefford Church, which had degenerated by 1870 into a deserted farmhouse, with the great hall used as a barn, was pulled down in that year. The small church, dedicated to St. Thomas, now stands alone in a field by the river. On the exterior is a dripstone moulding ending in grotesque carved heads, a Norman window and several perpendicular ones, dormer windows above, a brick eighteenth-century porch, a scratch dial on the west end of the small south aisle,



(2) East Shefford Church: Purbeck marble tomb of Sir John Fettiplace (d. 1524) and his wife Dorothy (d. 1559).

and a small wooden bellcote—there seems never to have been a tower. The interior of the church contains, besides the above tombs, a round Norman font, a plain piscina and some sixteenth-century glass with the Fettiplace arms quartered with those of their neighbours, the Bessels. This glass was for a time in a new Victorian church, Holy Innocents, now demolished.

St. Thomas's Church was dismissed as being "of little interest" in Murray's *Guide* to the district soon after the mediaeval church's replacement by the Victorian one, and it has attracted little attention since. *The Ecclesiastical and Archaeological Topography of the Diocese of Oxford* described the church as a "small, poor perpendicular chapel with square-headed late perpendicular windows and wooden bellcote", and only mentioned internally John Fettiplace's tomb and the armorial glass. Even Dr. Niklaus Pevsner's recent *Guide to Berkshire* makes but a passing reference to the perpendicular windows and sixteenth-century glass. *The Little Guide to Berkshire* (1934 edition, pp. 185-86) alone has a more adequate description.

East Shefford Church was declared redundant in 1970, and I was asked by the officers of the Redundant Churches Fund to check the walls for any remaining traces of mediaeval decoration. At first sight I was not very hopeful about finding much in the way of murals. There were only scraps of post-Reformation cartouche showing through here and there on the north wall, but when I began to remove the limewash it was clear that the walls had been covered by a very elaborate scheme of late eighteenth-century ornament consisting of texts, the Commandments and the Doxology, all with elaborate painted borders on a golden-yellow ground. These eighteenth-century patterns were continued throughout the church at dado level, with the churchwardens' names inscribed over the nave windows. Unfortunately the plaster was very loose and missing altogether in places. However, I found that there were three post-Reformation schemes in all, and that the chancel was decorated with the latest, with two beautifully bordered cartouches and the remains of a text over the altar; and I was able to make out the two earlier levels where necessary on the north wall of the nave.

Over the chancel arch were hanging two Commandment boards and the Royal Arms, evidently hung there when the flaking limewash finally proved too weak a ground for further decoration. These boards were removed in order to examine the plaster beneath. Again there were scraps of very fragmentary late cartouche work,

but it was the earliest level of plaster that turned out to be the most rewarding. After carefully uncovering this first painting scheme it was possible to see what the church was like and how it was decorated at the time it was built. It appears to have had a flat roof two or three inches below the present roof of the nave. As for the chancel arch, this would appear to have been considerably—and, I think, dangerously—widened in the early fifteenth century when the first Fettiplace tomb was erected. The original chancel arch must have been very small, for it can clearly be seen that if all the painted arches over it were extended to the same height and depth as the remaining complete one on the north side, there would only be enough room for a narrow arch. This conclusion can possibly be checked when the floor here is excavated later in the year.

There were five painted arches in all over the chancel arch unless the central one was a roundel. Only a fragment remains from which to judge but this arch or roundel was certainly wider than the pairs



(3) East Shefford Church: Caen stone coffin recently found in the thickness of the chancel's north wall.



(4) East Shefford Church: Early frescoes over the chancel arch. Above are 15th century paintings.

which flanked it. The painting as a whole possibly depicts a Nativity series. Starting from the left-hand side, the first King's head is complete, but of the second King only his crown remains, and the third King is missing altogether as the central part of the painting was destroyed when the chancel arch was widened. On the right the curtaining of the Nativity scene remains, and in the last arch a nimbed angel remains intact (Plate 4).

The painting continues on the south wall of the nave, where there are two more painted arches, the first containing a large figure of a saint, but the second partly destroyed when a window was inserted. Above this window the two painted arches were completed with a bent riband ornament. On the north side of the nave there must have been two similar arches, but the first was destroyed when the fifteenth-century rood stair was inserted. However, the painting appears again at the second arch and has a fine band of ornament on its west side. This ornament ends with a black line which can be seen

to have extended at wall-plate level all round the church. Apart from Consecration crosses, two on the west wall and others on the north and south walls, there is no further trace of this earliest painted scheme. The first plaster level over it is unpainted. This covers both the north and west walls and parts of the south wall. The rest of the latter is of late date, indicating that this part was rebuilt some time in the fifteenth century.

The painter at East Shefford must first have made, or caused to be prepared, enough fine plaster to cover the inside of the church. This plaster was of fine texture and pinkish in colour. A small area, enough for a day's work, would have been laid at a time, the joints overlapping as the work progressed. This method was the usual one: at Clayton in Sussex one could trace each day's progress until the work was finally completed with the central figure of Christ over the chancel arch. Kempley in Gloucestershire and Hardham in Sussex also have overlapping joints clearly defined, but in the case of East Shefford the painting did not cover the whole church but only the east end and part of the north and south walls.

The painting was first lightly sketched on the loose plaster and a *veneda* underpainting laid for the flesh areas. Sometimes parts of the drapery and ornament were elaborated by tempera-painting. When the painting was completed it was polished. Theophilus mentions the polishing of plaster; and the paintings at Pompeii and Herculaneum were polished. Durham Cathedral has another example in the St. Cuthbert and St. Oswald paintings, and St. Albans in the twelfth-century Crucifixion. Sometimes the overpainting of the flesh perished, leaving the dark *veneda* underpaint showing. This was so at East Shefford, and there are many other examples, including work at Norwich Cathedral, Little Wenham in Suffolk, Little Easton in Essex, and again the Crucifixion in St. Albans Cathedral. Perhaps the *veneda* technique was faulty, or our churches too damp. In the case of East Shefford most of the colour has darkened considerably, more so than in any other work of which I know. This darkening may be due to the excessive moisture content in the walls here. Until recently a heavy cement rendering covered the walls below dado level and caused the impeded moisture to dry out through the painted surface. The poor condition of the church undoubtedly led to the deterioration of the later cartouche paintings; but the earlier painting, being in true fresco, was more resilient.

I shall not attempt to date closely the work at East Shefford, but



(5) Winchester: 9th century painted stone (by courtesy of the Winchester Excavations Committee).

would point out factors which, to my mind, roughly indicate the age of the paintings. It should be remembered that painters were working at Winchester and Abingdon from Saxon times. The band of ornament completing the paintings at East Shefford is of exactly the same pattern as a fragment of painted stone excavated at Winchester<sup>1</sup> (Plate 5), and which is agreed to be of ninth-century date. The same pattern can be found at Kempley in Gloucestershire and Copford in Essex, both early work. The head of the first King at East Shefford is very like the head of King Edgar in the New Minster (Winchester) charter;<sup>2</sup> and polished plaster has only been found in early work. Moreover, the acanthus drawing on the capitals of the columns at East Shefford, and the early windows inserted through the paintings already there, point to an early date. I do not belong to the school of thought that dates all round arches as of the twelfth century. There is ample evidence of round arches in manuscripts



carvings and paintings of admittedly earlier date. Together with my assistants I have worked on many of our early paintings; for example, those at Durham, Pitlington (near Durham), Canterbury, Winchester, Copford, Hardham, Kempley and Clayton, yet apart from the fragment from the Winchester excavation we all consider that the East Shefford paintings are our earliest.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Now in Winchester Museum.

<sup>2</sup> B.M., New Minster Charters, No. 966.